

Plentiful Obstacles Remain to Gorbachev's Reforms

By STEPHEN F. COHEN

Six months after Mikhail S. Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party, most American commentators have concluded that he is already the undisputed master of Soviet power and policy. The real situation is different, as indicated by the Soviet press and by conversations with officials in Moscow. Gorbachev is secure as party leader, but his program calling for "deep transformations" in the economic system has encountered stubborn bureaucratic opposition even, as he admits, at "top echelons," and his own power to legislate such reforms, much less have them implemented, remains limited.

That the struggle continues should come as no surprise. Soviet political succession has always been a long drama, never a single act. Every new party leader has needed years of patronage, compromise and coercion to extend his authority over broader policy realms. And though every general secretary since Stalin has tried to carry out significant changes in the Stalinist economic system, not one has succeeded.

Nor do leadership changes since March suggest the already dominant Gorbachev portrayed in so many Western accounts. Except for Grigory Romanov, his only plausible but very weak rival for the general secretaryship, no one has been removed from the Politburo. Its 13 voting members still include five aged but influential survivors from the conservative Brezhnev era. As for the other voting members, including four promoted under Gorbachev, there is no reason to assume that they are merely his political creatures. Like Gorbachev, several are relatively young, reform-minded men who rose rapidly under Yuri V. Andropov in 1982-1984. But, once promoted, former loyalists often have ambitions of their own.

Moreover, Andrei A. Gromyko's elevation from foreign minister to president can hardly be interpreted as a great victory for Gorbachev. The view that Gorbachev kicked him "upstairs" in order to seize control of foreign policy assumes that Gromyko had monopolized the field and had opposed the new general secretary. There is no evidence for either assumption. Major foreign-policy decisions are made in the Politburo, where Gromyko remains a full member.

Most significant, Gorbachev did not get the ceremonial presidency, which was sought and won by the three preceding party leaders because it gave them head-of-state status in international affairs. His explanation that he was too busy with domestic problems was nonsense; he had been meeting regularly with visiting foreign leaders, and had already arranged summits with French President Francois

Mitterrand and President Reagan. Some Moscow officials say privately that Gorbachev wants the powerful office of prime minister. If so, he will have to wage a major battle to repeal a 1964 Central Committee resolution prohibiting party leaders from being head of the government ministries.

Whatever the backstage politics, oblique polemics in the Soviet press are additional evidence of Gorbachev's limited power. Longstanding advocates and opponents of change in various policy areas, perceiving new opportunities or dangers, have redoubled their own efforts. Gorbachev's economic policies are at the center of these conflicts. Hinting at more reforms to come, he has called for a restructuring of the entire planning and management system that would sharply reduce the direct control exercised by Moscow planners and ministries, give enterprise managers more freedom to operate by "economic rather than administrative methods" and cut drastically the "superfluous" vast middle-level bureaucracy of ministerial agencies. A nationwide expansion of Andropov's 1983 "experiment," the program threatens countless government officials and has aroused strong bureaucratic opposition.

In response, Gorbachev's supporters have stepped up their attacks on "the ministerial apparatus." A well-known reformer has virtually accused such "group interests," a fitting but unorthodox pejorative in the Soviet Union, of sabotaging Gorbachev's policy. And, in a candid speech on June 11, Gorbachev personally dropped the fiction of a united Soviet leadership. "The ministries," he charged, "have no interest in the economic experience . . . in the introduction of those principles." The ministries have representatives and allies on the Politburo and Central Committee, and are responsible for implementing those "principles," so the obstacles to Gorbachev's reforms are plentiful.

None of this is new. Twenty years ago the fledgling Brezhnev-Kosygin leadership introduced a similar reform with equal fanfare. It disappeared in the government bureaucracy. Can Gorbachev therefore never be the reform leader that he clearly wishes to be? Though many circumstances remain the same, much has also changed in the Soviet Union and in the world where it must compete as a superpower. Given Gorbachev's youth, the lagging Soviet economy and a growing reformist mood among the elite, he may eventually succeed, but not without a long struggle that has only begun.

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